

## August 18, 2004: USCIRF to be honored by Teitz Award on Religious Tolerance and Freedom

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE August 18, 2004 Contact: Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) will receive the Judge George Alexander Teitz Award from the Touro Synagogue Foundation, a non-denominational, non-sectarian, non-profit institution. The award is given annually to "an individual or program that best exemplifies the ideals of religious, ethnic, and racial tolerance and freedom, as set forth in President George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island in 1790." This year's award is being given in recognition of USCIRF's work to promote religious freedom and to combat religious intolerance throughout the world. Commission Chair Preeta D. Bansal and Vice Chair Felice D. Gaer will receive the award at the Touro Synagogue in Newport, RI, on August 22 on behalf of the Commission. The award presentation will be followed by the Annual Washington Letter Reading, at which United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg will be the keynote speaker. Text of press release issued by the Touro Synagogue Foundation on the award: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to Receive Teitz Award from Touro Synagogue Foundation Newport, RI, August 17, 2004 - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is to receive the Judge George Alexander Teitz Award during the Touro Synagogue Foundation's George Washington Letter Weekend. The award will be presented at the Sharing our History Brunch on Sunday August 22, 2004 at the Hotel Viking. The Teitz Award annually honors an individual or organization for commitment to religious freedom and tolerance, the twin hallmarks of President Washington's letter to "the Hebrew Congregation in Newport," which Washington gave to the congregation on August 21, 1790. Last year's award recipient was The Program on Intrastate Conflict, Conflict Prevention, and Conflict Resolution, a joint program of the World Peace Foundation and the Belfer Center, Kennedy School of Government, at Harvard University. This year's Teitz Award will recognize the worldwide nonpartisan commitment to religious freedom and tolerance of the Commission on International Religious Freedom, as demonstrated by its actions and accomplishments, including: Making findings, recommendations, and speaking out to promote the internationally enshrined rights of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief, Actively working in Afghanistan and Iraq to ensure that their newly formed governments protect religious freedom and institutionalize it in new constitutions, Speaking out repeatedly on the complete lack of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, and its export of religious hatred and intolerance, Pressing the Chinese government to end its current crackdown on religious and spiritual groups, Holding hearings and roundtables to highlight critical religious freedom concerns, and Working to expand the definition of religious freedom from a narrow right of group worship, to a guarantee to every person of the individual freedoms of religious belief and practice without fear of oppression or punishment, so that in the words of George Washington, "every one shall sit in safety under his vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) to monitor the status of religious freedom abroad as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. By publicly providing reliable information, analysis, and creative and responsible policy recommendations, the Commission gives the U.S. government and the American people the tools necessary to advance religious freedom and related human rights throughout the world. In the words of a key drafter of IRFA, the Commission was established for the purpose of ensuring "that the President and the Congress receive independent recommendations and, where necessary, criticism of American policy that does not promote international religious freedom." The bipartisan Commission, which began its work in May 1999, is an independent federal agency, separate from the State Department. The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom serves ex officio as a non-voting member. Accepting the Award on behalf of the Commission will be its Chair, Preeta D. Bansal, and its Vice Chair, Felice D. Gaer. In his famous letter "To the Hebrew Congregation In Newport" written in response to a query from Touro Synagogue Warden Moses Seixas, President George Washington affirmed the founding fathers' commitment to the principles of religious freedom by pledging that the new American nation..."gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance..." Nearly two years before the passage of the Bill of Rights, President Washington's letter set the standard for religious freedom in the United States. Touro Synagogue, dedicated in 1763, is the oldest synagogue building in the United States. Designed by noted colonial architect Peter Harrison, Touro Synagogue is considered one of the finest examples of 18th century American architecture. Touro Synagogue: A National Historic Site, operates public programs in partnership with the National Park Service, The National Trust for Historic Preservation and is a project of Save America's Treasures. Touro Synagogue is located in downtown Newport, RI at 85 Touro St. The Sharing our History Brunch is part of a three-day weekend of events celebrating the George Washington Letter and 350 years of American Jewish Life. For more information about registration for the weekend, contact Marla Dansky, Education Director, The Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue at 401-847-4794 x14. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress. Preeta D. Bansal, Chair &bull; Felice D. Gaer, Vice Chair &bull; Nina Shea, Vice Chair &bull; Patti Chang &bull; Archbishop Charles J. Chaput &bull; Khaled Abou El Fadl &bull; Richard Land &bull; Bishop Ricardo Ramirez &bull; Michael K. Young &bull; Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio &bull; Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director